

LETTER PERFECT

RICHARD LEDERER

San Diego, California

Letters lives in the heart of logoillogy. No surprise then that quite the majority of our letters are also words or sound like words:

<i>A</i> : a, eh	<i>I</i> : aye, eye, I	<i>N</i> : en	<i>T</i> : tea, tee
<i>B</i> : be, bee	<i>J</i> : jay	<i>O</i> : O, oh, owe	<i>U</i> : ewe, yew, you
<i>C</i> : sea, see	<i>K</i> : quay	<i>P</i> : pea, pee	<i>X</i> : ex
<i>G</i> : gee	<i>L</i> : el	<i>Q</i> : cue, queue	<i>Y</i> : why
	<i>M</i> : em	<i>R</i> : are	

And more than half our letters, when pluralized, sound like words:

<i>B</i> 's: bees	<i>K</i> 's: quays	<i>P</i> 's: peas, pease, pees
<i>C</i> 's: seas, sees, seize	<i>L</i> 's: els	<i>Q</i> 's: cues, queues
<i>E</i> 's: ease	<i>M</i> 's: ems	<i>T</i> 's: teas, tease, tees
<i>G</i> 's: geez	<i>N</i> 's: ens	<i>U</i> 's: ewes, use, yews, youse
<i>I</i> 's: ayes, eyes	<i>O</i> 's: ohs, owes	<i>X</i> 's: exes
<i>J</i> 's: jays		<i>Y</i> 's: wise, whys

Much of the challenge of English orthography is that 80 percent of our words are haunted by the ghosts of silent letters. Listen now to the sounds of silence. All twenty-six of our letters are mute in one word or another. Here's an alphabet of such contexts to demonstrate the deafening silence that rings through English orthography:

<i>A</i> : bread, marriage, pharaoh	<i>N</i> : column, hymn, monsieur
<i>B</i> : debt, subtle, thumb	<i>O</i> : country, laboratory, people
<i>C</i> : blackguard, indict, yacht	<i>P</i> : cupboard, psychology, receipt
<i>D</i> : edge, handkerchief, Wednesday	<i>Q</i> : lacquer, racquet
<i>E</i> : more, height, steak	<i>R</i> : chevalier, forecastle, yarmulke
<i>F</i> : halfpenny	<i>S</i> : debris, island, viscount
<i>G</i> : gnarled, reign, tight	<i>T</i> : gourmet, listen, rapport
<i>H</i> : ghost, heir, through	<i>U</i> : circuit, dough, gauge
<i>I</i> : business, seize, Sioux	<i>V</i> : fivepence
<i>J</i> : marijuana, rijsttafel	<i>W</i> : answer, two, wrist
<i>K</i> : blackguard, knob	<i>X</i> : faux pas, grand prix, Sioux
<i>L</i> : half, salmon, would	<i>Y</i> : aye, prayer
<i>M</i> : mnemonic	<i>Z</i> : pince-nez, rendezvous

Now consider the opposite phenomenon, words in which a letter is sounded even though that letter is not included in the spelling. In *Xerox*, for example, the letter *z* speaks even though it doesn't appear in the base word. Behold, then, a complete alphabet of silent hosts:

A: bouquet	G: jeep	N: comptroller	U: ewe
B: W	H: nature	O: beau	V: of
C: sea	I: eye	P: hiccough	W: one
D: Taoism	J: margin	Q: cue	X: decks
E: happy	K: quay	R: colonel	Y: wine
F: ephemeral	L: salmon	S: civil	Z: xylophone
	M: grandpa	T: missed	

What characteristic do the following words share?: *any, arty, beady, cagey, cutie, decay, easy, empty, envy, essay, excel, excess, icy, ivy, kewpie, seedy, and teepee*? Turns out that each word is cobbled from the sounds of two letters—*NE, RT, BD, KG, QT, DK, EZ, MT, NV, SA, XL, XS, IC, IV, QP, CD, and TP*. Such words are labeled grammagrams.

Gaze upon some three-syllable grammagrams:

avian (AVN)	effendi (FND)	escapee (SKP)
cesium (CZM)	enemy (NME)	odious (ODS)
deify (DFI)	envious (NVS)	opium (OPM)
devious (DVS)		tedious (TDS)

And behold four four-syllable grammagrams:

anemone (NMNE) Arcadian (RKDN) eminency (MNNC) excellency (XLNC)

Finally, I call forth the three longest grammagrams—the pentasyllabic *effeminacy* (FMNSE), *expediency* (XPDNC), and *obediency* (OBDNC).

Here's a swatch of letter-perfect verse, with accompanying translation. Keep in mind that the same letter twice in a row sounds like a plural. For example, *UU* means *use*.

YURYY
Is EZ to C
U should be called
“XLNC.”

Translation

Why you are wise
Is easy to see.
You should be called
“Excellency.”

U XEd NE
MT TT.
I NV how U
XL with EE.

You exceed any
Empty tease.
I envy how you
Excel with ease.

Now you should be able to identify the aural bond shared by *anyone, aviate, beaten, before, benign, canine, deviate, eaten, emanate, and expiate*.

The answer is that each of the ten words is composed of one or more letter sounds followed by the sound of a number—*NE1, AV8, B10, B4, B9, K9, DV8, L10, MN8, and XP8*.

Now listen to *eighty, foray, foresee, forum, foreign, onesy, sixty, tennis, tenty* (“attentive”), and *tutee* (“one who is tutored”).

What unites these ten words is that each be translated into a number sound followed by a letter sound—*8E, 4A, 4C, 4M, 4N, 1Z, 6T, 10S, 10T, and 2T*.

Within each five-word set that follows lurks a common denominator of letter sounds. Rinse out your ears, say each word aloud, and have at these letter-perfect clusters. Then check your responses with thode reposing in Answers and Solutions.

1. berate, emit, effeminate, elementary, esteem

2. calliope, lazy, liberty, needy, squeegee

3. circus, cook, judge, solstice, zebras

4. area, cystic, gesturing, series, whew

Now lend me your ears as you listen to the sounds of the words in each of the next groupings:

5. ewe, eye, hour, there, wee

6. heed, isle, weed, wheel, Yule

7. id, shed, shell, wed, well

8. ate, fore, sics, to, won

9. bough, dough, cough, hiccough, tough

10. bare, hoarse, new, links, towed

11. colon, herb, job, nice, polish

12. bass, deserts, entrance, moped, wind